

# MISSOURI CONSERVATION SHOWCASE

## Hmong Like Farm Life in Southwestern Missouri

**D**an Philbrick became acquainted with Hmong people many years ago while he was serving the United States as a soldier in Vietnam. But Philbrick was surprised a few years ago to see Hmong families moving to southwestern Missouri, where he is a district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).



*NRCS District Conservationist Dan Philbrick with Blong Thao and his son Howard on Thao's chicken farm in Lawrence County, Missouri.*

“One couple moved to Barry County in 2002, and now there are probably 200 Hmong families living in Barry, Newton, McDonald and Lawrence counties,” Philbrick says.

The attraction is the availability of poultry farms, which young Hmong families see as a way out of the cities they have lived in since fleeing from their native Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. During the Vietnam conflict, many Hmong served as allies of the United States, and later migrated to the United States to escape reprisal. Most of them settled in cities in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Traditionally, however, the Hmong were

farmers who lived in clans and raised livestock and crops in the mountains.

“They are coming down here because it’s warmer and because it allows them to get back to their agrarian culture,” Philbrick says. “It also allows them to be more involved in raising their children.”

Most of the Hmong people moving to southwestern Missouri are one-generation removed from the ones who were involved in the Vietnam conflict.

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~ *Blong Thao*

They were children when they moved to the United States. But many have retained their desire for their native way of life.

Blong Thao moved in July 2005 to Lawrence County from Madison, WI, with his wife, Yia Yang, and their four young children. He says he likes the change.

“In Laos we lived in mountains, in villages,” Thao says. “When we came to the United States we lived where there were a lot of people. It is hard. I worked in an office in a cubicle with no windows. It’s very stressful. I think Hmong have a desire for space. A lot of people have that in their blood.”

Thao says the opportunity to spend more time together as a family also makes life as a chicken farmer preferable to life in the city.

“Here, we live on our own farm,” he says. “We are gone a few hours (taking care of the chickens) and we come back. There are only a few days – when the chickens arrive – when we work long hours.

“It’s very hard for family people working in the city. People started looking for opportunities. This is one of them.”

Life as poultry farmers isn’t for everyone. Yer Yang and her husband, Nengntakhueng Thao, moved to Barry County from Wisconsin in June 2003. Yang says her husband likes the new way of life, but she has convinced him to sell the farm because she worries about potential health risks associated with poultry.

“I don’t even bring my children to the chicken house,” she says. “It’s too dirty, too smelly.”

Blong Thao says he is more worried about propane prices, which have reduced profits. He says he and other Hmong families in the area are goal oriented.

“The Hmong people, even if they don’t like it, they will sacrifice in order to be with family,” he says. “Chickens are a way to acquire land. I don’t have a computer science degree. I can’t make a computer chip. But I can raise chickens.”

Thao admits that the way he raises chickens (more than 90,000 at a time in four houses) is nothing like the free-range method of his ancestors.

Because of the concentration of poultry, and the potential that raises for polluting the environment, NRCS and local soil and water conservation district employees work closely with the Hmong farmers to make sure



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Soil and Water Conservation  
District.

“Every single time that I go there, they give me the help that I need,” she says.

Philbrick and the Hmong poultry farmers he assists have taken different paths from southeast Asia to southwestern Missouri. But they each are committed to preserving something: for the Hmong it’s a way of life; for Philbrick it’s the natural resources that make farming possible.

*Written by Charlie Rahm  
NRCS, March 2006*

they get all of the necessary permits and to help them develop and follow nutrient management plans. NRCS has also helped several Hmong farmers construct litter-storage sheds through NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

“We’ve developed a really good relationship with them,” Philbrick says.

Philbrick says the language barrier has been the biggest obstacle. A couple members of the Hmong community have volunteered to go along with him on some on-farm visits to serve as translators. But even that doesn’t always solve the problem.

“There are not a lot of technical words in the Hmong language, and that makes it difficult to translate environmental information,” Philbrick says. But he says the Hmong people are generally conservation minded and “want to do it right.” For example, he says that about 30 of the 50 people who attended a recent water quality meeting were Hmong.

Thao says he is thankful for all of the assistance NRCS has provided, and not just the EQIP contract that helped him build a composter.

“Even just information is very helpful,” he says.

Yer Yang may not like the poultry business, but she says she is very thankful for the assistance she has received from NRCS and the Barry County

## *Helping People Help the Land.*

*Blong Thao and his wife Yia Yang moved to southwestern Missouri to escape the city life, spend more time together as a family and raise chickens.*

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